

The Perseverance of Black Women through the Pandemic

Introduction:

In Ed Young's "How the Pandemic Defeated America: A Virus has brought the world's most powerful country to its knees," he reports how the inconsistencies of American politics tied with decades long legislation that intentionally maintains a economic and racial hierarchy, with the addition of a failing healthcare system are all contributing factors to the catastrophic global pandemic beginning January of 2021. I've taken interest in the African diaspora and how black women of all ages have been thrown into a pandemic. With little to no resources, they are forced to navigate the global crisis as their more privileged counterparts seem to face only minor inconveniences. Defined by Malcolm X, the Black Woman is "...the most neglected person in America...", due to the oppression they face as a woman and for being black. During the pandemic, black women have been tasked with being on the front lines at racial justice movements through Black Lives Matter during the summer of 2020, as well as being primary caregivers and essential workers. Recognizing this and working to create resources for black women will contribute to the betterment of the black woman's mental health and ease the emotional burden that comes with having to 'toughen up' in apprehensive times.

Paragraph 1: Why Center the Oppression of Black Women? Historical Context and Modern Data Justifies this Important Topic

It is critical to understand the importance of the historical precedence of racism to why black women find themselves facing forms of oppression in modern day. The role of black women as the caring and patient archetype is rooted in slavery. Even post slavery, the race-based segregated economy has black women finding themselves stuck as the mammy caricature, which "...implied that black women were only fit to be domestic workers; thus the stereotype became a rationalization for economic discrimination," (Pilgrim 2012). This stereotype becomes commercialized and sold to the general public, commodifying the labor of black women to remind their oppressors of an era where black women had even more limited freedom. The continuity of the economic oppression of black women into the modern world is evident as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on black women of all ages. The Institute for Women's Policy Research reported that Black and Hispanic teenage girls are more likely than their white counterparts to take on more responsibility at home during the shutdown portion of the pandemic. In a graph, using the data from the Institute for Women's Policy Research, from April to June of 2020; Black women had the second-highest rate of unemployment at 30.7%, compared to Latina women at 31%: still second by a very small margin. These women find themselves making sacrifices and putting the needs of others, mainly their family and whomever they provide care for, before themselves. In an article from the Human Rights Watch had been conversing with a young black woman from rural Bolivar County, Mississippi; she was planning on attending college, being the first in her family to do so. But with the onset of the pandemic, she was forced to stay home, quit her job, and find time to take care of her grandmother, while

also setting a schooling system for her children. The organization then says, “The pandemic has exposed systemic inequalities and structural racism. It has taken a disproportionate toll on Black people, especially in the rural South, where limited access to medical care and high poverty rates lead to some of the country’s worst health outcomes,” (Daniel and Furdge 2020). The pandemic emphasized the failure of the government to protect everyone’s fundamental human right to access good quality healthcare, while also pointing out how black women were never guaranteed this right. With decades of having to endure structural racism, discrimination, and poverty; black people, in general, have always been left out in receiving the benefits they deserve from the healthcare system. Black women have higher mortality rates because of racist curriculum in medical schools and individuals too ignorant to spend the same amount of time and energy into their black patients as their non-black counterparts. This lack of care for Black Women leaves them more vulnerable to various illnesses, including the new and deadly virus.

Paragraph 2: Black Non-men on the forefront of Racial Justice, UCSB’s Black Women’s Health Collaborative, and the legacy of the modern Black Woman

Furthermore, in addition, Black women are also tasked with the responsibility of taking the lead in actions towards racial justice. In the New York Times article, ‘No Time to Be a Child’ Scheherazade Tillet who is founder and executive director of A Long Walk Home, an organization that empowers Black women in Chicago says “...Black women were on the front lines of racial justice movements, they were essential workers and they were primary givers... there’s no other group that was all three of those things at once, (Gupta 2021). Founded by three black women, Black Lives Matter is the biggest racial justice movement in recent decades in influence and impact. With its origin as a hashtag for the tragic death of Trayvon Martin, then transforming into a global organization with the goal of dismantling white supremacy, ending violence inflicted on Black communities, and centering black joy. The term ‘intersectionality’ was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in order to explain the complexity of the multiple forms of oppression that black women face; while also finding ways to assist black women when they are in need of resources or support. Since the 60s, advocacy groups have been created for black women identifying individuals such as the National Black Feminist Organization, black sororities, and the National Association for Colored Women. Advocacy for black women also starts in an academic setting, thus at UC Santa Barbara, the A.S. Black Women’s Health Collaborative was founded. The purpose of this organization is to provide support for black women and strive for the betterment of their spiritual, mental, and physical health. What makes this organization unique and revolutionary is they are able to streamline funding from Associated Students directly to black women and nonmen on campus. In an interview with the school newspaper *The Daily Nexus*, Co-founder Zion Solomon states, “...Black women’s health and concerns and needs not being at the forefront despite Black women doing the bulk of the labor in [student] organizations... We thought it would be wonderful to put Black women at the center of the labor and material resources of Associated Students and have the power to distribute that to Black organizations, organizations of color and [organizations] that are within our mission statement and goals,” (Shuda and Ananthavel 2021). Although the collaborative also provides financial support to other organizations financially, in terms of

community, having a space for black women is especially important to its members. Co-founder Suad Abdullahi says, “Finding community with other Black people is great, but when you’re experiencing multiple layers of oppression, there’s times where it’s just really important to be around people within your own specific identity group, because that’s where I personally found the most support, is with other Black women.” In response to COVID and understanding the financial burden of the pandemic on black women and non-men, the collaborative opened an application-based emergency grant of \$250 in hopes of providing relief for black students potentially resolving various financial concerns.

Conclusion:

Circling back to Ed Young’s “How the Pandemic Defeated America: A Virus has brought the world’s most powerful country to its knees,” he introduces the oppression of Black People during the pandemic as they face medical and financial discrimination. Based on multiple studies and data, it is evident that Black women must endure subsistence of their oppression as it is not as recognized as it should be. The purpose of this research is to provide an understanding of the intersectionality of Black Women’s oppression, which makes them unique to the oppression of Black Men. This includes race, gender, sexuality, and class. Despite being one of the demographics that had the highest rate of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Women have worked relentlessly to carry on responsibilities at home and work spaces while also creating resources for themselves out of necessity as their oppression is not as recognized as it should be. However, with time and more media coverage, more people can get educated and do more to support Black Women by recognizing and understanding the uniqueness of their oppression and work to advocate for their mental, spiritual, and physical wellness.